The Eleven Choices on the Path to Growth

A Modern Distillation of the Buddha’s Discourse on the Cowherd

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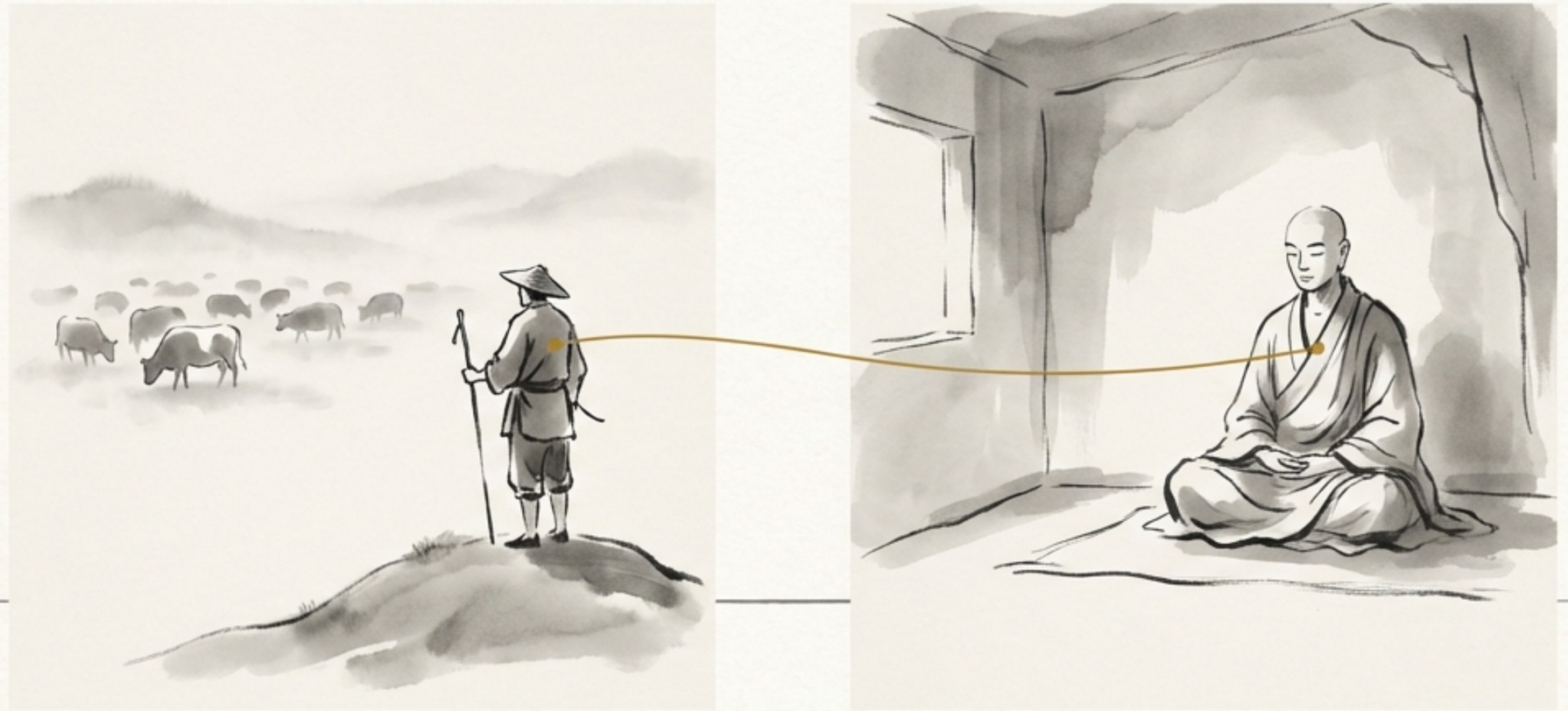

An Ancient Analogy for Inner Cultivation

The Buddha compared the qualities of a spiritual practitioner to those of a cowherd. Just as a cowherd must possess certain skills to maintain and expand a herd, a practitioner must cultivate specific qualities to achieve growth, improvement, and maturity in their training.

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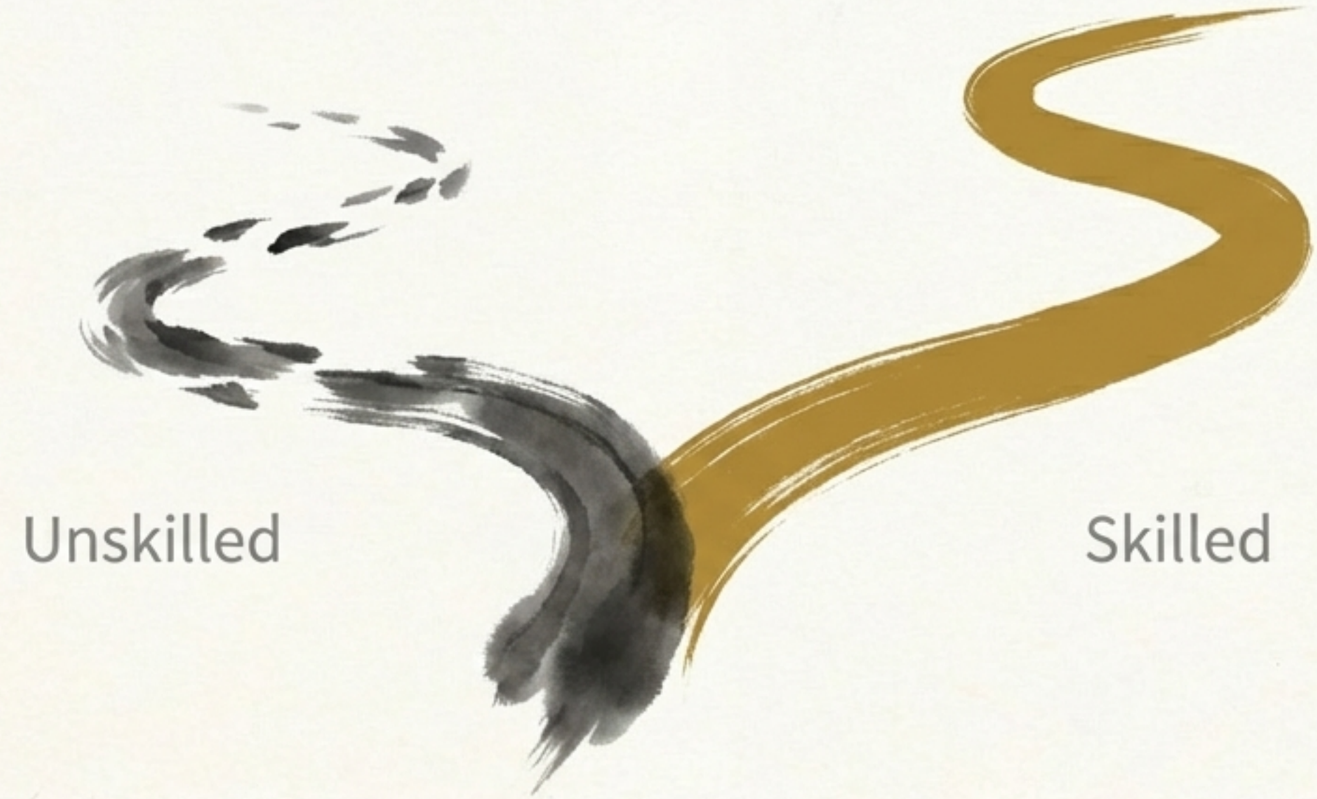

Two Paths, Eleven Choices

The discourse outlines eleven factors. For each, there is an unskilled path that leads to stagnation and a skilled path that leads to genuine growth. We will explore each choice side-by-side to understand the direct consequences of our inner actions.

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1. Knowing Form

Doesn’t know the form of the cattle.

Doesn’t truly understand that all form is the four principal states, or form derived from the four principal states.

Knows the form of the cattle.

Truly understands that all form is the four principal states, or form derived from the four principal states.

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2. Being Skilled in Characteristics

The Unskilled Path

Unskilled in the characteristics of the cattle.

Doesn’t understand that a fool is characterized by their deeds, and an astute person is characterized by their deeds.

The Skilled Path

Skilled in the characteristics of the cattle.

Understands that a fool is characterized by their deeds, and an astute person is characterized by their deeds.

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3. Picking Out Flies' Eggs

The Unskilled Path.

Cowherd Analogy:
"Doesn't pick out flies' eggs from the cattle's skin."

Mendicant's Failure:
Tolerates a sensual, malicious, or cruel thought that has arisen. They tolerate any bad, unskillful qualities… They don't give them up, get rid of them, eliminate them, and obliterate them.

The Skilled Path

Cowherd Analogy:
"Picks out flies' eggs."

Mendicant's Success
Doesn't tolerate a sensual, malicious, or cruel thought… but gives them up, gets rid of them, eliminates them, and obliterates them.

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4. Dressing Wounds

✗ The Unskilled Path

Cowherd Analogy: Doesn't dress the cattle's wounds.

Mendicant's Failure: When they see a sight, hear a sound, or know an idea… they get caught up in the features and details. The faculty is left unrestrained, and and bad unskillful qualities of covetousness and displeasure become overwhelming.

✓ The Skilled Path

Cowherd Analogy: Dresses the wounds.

Mendicant's Success: They don't get caught up in the features and details… they practice restraint, protecting the faculty of sight… mind, and achieving its restraint.

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5. Spreading Smoke

Cowherd Analogy
Doesn’t spread smoke to repel insects.

Mendicant’s Failure
Doesn’t teach others the Dhamma in detail as they learned and memorized it.

Cowherd Analogy
Spreads smoke.

Mendicant’s Success
Teaches others the Dhamma in detail as they learned and memorized it.

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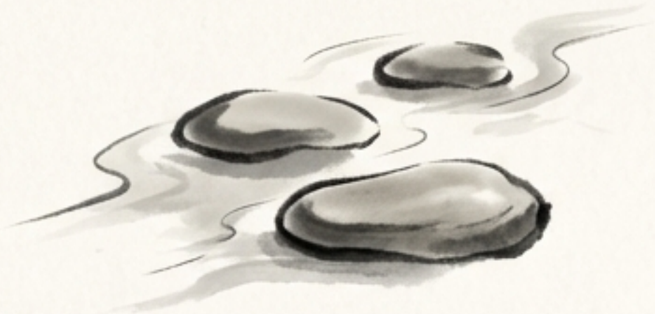
6. Knowing the Ford



The Unskilled Path

Cowherd Analogy: Doesn't know the safe crossing points for the herd.

Mendicant's Failure: Doesn't go to those mendicants who are very learned… and ask them questions…… and ask them questions… Those venerables don't reveal what is hidden, clarify what is unclear, and dispel doubt.

The Skilled Path

Cowherd Analogy: Knows the ford.

Mendicant's Success: Goes up to those mendicants who are very learned… and asks them questions: 'Why, sir, does it say this? What does that mean?'… They reveal what is hidden, clarify what is unclear, and dispel doubt.

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7. Knowing Satisfaction

Cowherd Analogy
Doesn't know where the herd can drink to satisfaction.

Mendicant's Failure: When the teaching... is being taught, finds no inspiration in the meaning and the teaching, and finds no joy connected with the teaching.

Cowherd Analogy
Knows where the herd can drink to satisfaction.

Mendicant's Success: Finds inspiration in the meaning and the teaching, and finds joy connected with the teaching.

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8. Knowing the Trail

The Unskilled Path

Cowherd Analogy:
Doesn't know the trail.

Mendicant's Failure: Doesn't truly understand the **Noble Eightfold Path**.

The Skilled Path

Cowherd Analogy:
Knows the trail.

Mendicant's Success: Truly understands the **Noble Eightfold Path**.

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9. Being Skilled in Ranges

The Unskilled Path

Cowherd Analogy: ***Not skilled in the herd's grazing ranges.***

Mendicant's Failure: Doesn't truly understand the **four kinds of mindfulness meditation**.

The Skilled Path

Cowherd Analogy: ***Skilled in ranges.***

Mendicant's Success: Truly understands the **four kinds of mindfulness meditation**.

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10. Not Milking Dry

The Unskilled Path

Cowherd Analogy: Milks the cows dry, leaving nothing for the calves.”

Mendicant’s Failure: When invited by a householder to accept robes, almsfood, lodgings, and medicines... doesn’t know moderation in accepting.

The Skilled Path

Cowherd Analogy: Doesn’t milk the cows dry.

Mendicant’s Success: Is invited by a householder... and that mendicant knows moderation in accepting.

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11. Showing Respect to Elders

The Unskilled Path

Cowherd Analogy: Doesn't show extra respect to the lead bulls.

Mendicant's Failure: Doesn't consistently treat senior mendicants… fathers and leaders of the Saṅgha with kindness by way of body, speech, and mind, both in public and in private.

The Skilled Path

Cowherd Analogy: Shows extra respect to the lead bulls.

Mendicant's Success: Consistently treats senior mendicants… with kindness by way of body, speech, and mind, both in public and in private.

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The Complete Path to Growth and Maturity

1. Know Form
2. Be Skilled in Characteristics
3. Pick Out Flies' Eggs
4. Dress Wounds
5. Spread Smoke
6. Know the Ford
7. Know Satisfaction
8. Know the Trail
9. Be Skilled in Ranges
10. Don't Milk Dry
11. Show Respect to Elders

A mendicant with these eleven qualities can achieve growth, improvement, and maturity in this teaching and training.

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